



Book Review

David Bell's *The First Total War*

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A review of: David A Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as we Know It*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

The comments below were presented as part of a round-table discussion of David Bell's The First Total War, conducted at the bi-annual meeting of the Council of European Studies, held in Chicago on 5-9 March 2008.

The outstanding features of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in the eyes of contemporaries were their scale and ferocity. The former quality has been fully captured by modern historians, but the latter has rather faded from view. One of the merits of David Bell's fine book is that he has restored ferocity to its proper place at the center of what was going on in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Scale and ferocity were linked in some respects. The frequency and intensity of pitched battles during this period were partly a reflection of the ability of the post-Revolutionary French state to generate an unprecedented stream of fresh troops, which in turn allowed commanders to take tactical risks that their predecessors a generation earlier would have avoided; the most important of which was the new practice of ruthless pursuit, by which a beaten army would not merely be driven from the battlefield, but harried into dissolution over succeeding days or weeks. On the whole a Napoleonic battle resembled those of the past more than of the future. Battle remained a discontinuous, episodic experience, even as it became more frequent. Yet contemporary observers sensed that what might be called the psychology of defeat was changing—it was becoming more cataclysmic, more humiliating. These qualities in turn lent military victory a political decisiveness it had not previously possessed.

Professor Bell's book is also a reminder that the wars of the Revolution and the Empire had an "Eastern Front"—it just happened to be in the West and South: in the Vendée, Iberia, and Italy. In these regions the scale of the fighting was less distinctive than its viciousness, above all in the prominence, if not preeminence, of guerilla warfare—a term made commonplace by the war in Spain. In these areas, as Bell shows, massacre and atrocity were sufficiently pervasive that it is not reasonable to regard them as "excesses" or "exceptions." They are very much the heart of the matter.

Are they also the heart of the period as a whole? Should they properly preside, like Stalingrad or Auschwitz, over our understanding of the times in which they occurred? This is, roughly speaking, the challenge posed by the claim that the wars of the Revolution and Napoleon were, collectively,

the first total war. And here I must confess to some embarrassment, because “total war” is a phrase I rarely use myself, and often warn my students against. This is awkward because there are now two books I must recommend to them that use this baleful expression on their covers, the other being the well-known history of the Second World War by Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint.^[1]

Calvocoressi and Wint felt no need to explain themselves. The war they were writing about had been called “total” while it was going on; and as a practical matter, whatever meaning we may assign to this expression, it must encompass a war in which as many as fifty million people may have died, the last few hundreds of thousands by means of weapons designed to unleash the forces by which the universe was created. Yet even the Second World War illustrates how markedly the conduct of total war may vary. The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union all fought what they believed to be total war, and have been given credit for doing so by historians; yet they did not fight or experience the war in remotely similar ways. Part of the weakness of “total war” as an analytic concept is that it is less a statement about war than about the outlook and actions of individual belligerents, some of whom may be fighting (or seeking) total war while others are not. This question clearly arises in the period that Professor Bell studies. Such moral and material asymmetries are also apparent when strong countries fight much weaker ones, a subject to which I will return in a moment.

In contrast to Calvocoressi and Wint, David Bell offers a good account, in his introduction, of the range of meanings that have accumulated around the idea of total war. Two elements stand out, however, as they must in any serious effort to come to grips with this concept: far-reaching (and ostensibly universal) social mobilization; and the widespread use of indiscriminate violence. This indiscriminancy is manifest above all in a disregard of the principle of non-combatant immunity, but also in the readiness of military leaders to disdain the lives of their own soldiers, an attitude that Bell attributes to Napoleon in particular.

Professor Bell, as he says, is not the first to describe the wars of the Revolution and Napoleon as total war. But his explanation for their totality is new. He argues that the total wars of the Revolutionary era were rooted in the utopian pacifism of the late Enlightenment, whose longing for, and belief in the possibility of, perpetual peace, countenanced and legitimized unstinting violence: no sacrifice would be too great in behalf of such a goal, and even rivers of innocent blood would be redeemed by the future happiness of mankind. Bell demonstrates that such ideas played a prominent role in the politics of the Revolution, which began by proclaiming its determination to live in peace with Europe, only to conclude that such peace would not be possible until all its enemies were dead. Nevertheless, the wars that arose from this toxic ideological stew lasted a long time, and I am uncertain whether the ideas that assisted in their emergence also account for their longevity. I doubt that Napoleon cared much about perpetual peace, and I am certain his opponents did not, a statement that applies with equal force to the Habsburg emperor and to the peasantry of Iberia.

Did the peasantry of Iberia fight total war? Certainly they did not shrink from the indiscriminate violence that is total war’s signal characteristic. Yet the idea of total war, to the extent that we wish to regard it as distinctively modern, can scarcely apply to the vernacular violence of the Spanish *guerrillas*, fighting to defend their homes, exact revenge, pillage the enemy’s stores, or simply repel the outsider. That they and their countrymen *suffered* total war seems fair enough; but the experience was basically familiar, even if the scale was new. The practices by which European states had controlled the mass of their subjects had always included precisely those forms of violence—mass reprisals, summary execution, hostage-taking, scorched earth, and so on—that, when applied on the international stage, bespoke an abandonment of all restraint, and a callous disregard for innocent life.

It seems to me that it is from the arena of civil war and intra-communal violence that the rhetoric and reality of total war make their way into European politics. Europeans at the end of the

eighteenth century had long since been accustomed to distinguishing between the violence that a prince might justly employ against a rebellious subject, and what he might do against another state and its subjects. The former was limited only by the mercy and prudence of God's own lieutenant. The latter, however, was hedged round by complex theories about just recourse to war, the morally vicarious nature of military violence (which is all that distinguishes soldiers from murderers), the proportionality of ends and means, and so on. One does not need to imagine such ideas actively rattling around in the crowned heads of Europe to recognize their prominence in both the legal and the strategic theory of the Old Regime.

In this respect I believe Professor Bell may sell his argument a little short. In his account of evolving Enlightenment attitudes toward war, he notes that the systematic distinction between the civil and military realms is a product of the last decades of the eighteenth century, an observation that is true of many other foundational concepts of modern social theory as well: the idea of the "public" and of "public opinion," for instance, and of "society" itself, which is rarely regarded as a unitary, reified object of inquiry before this period. But even so, the principle of non-combatant immunity—the idea that there are classes of people who may not be justly killed in war—was perfectly familiar to medieval theorists of *jus in bello*, who looked back to the work of Saint Augustine. Although this observation may undermine Bell's argument about the novelty of the ideological forces at work in the late eighteenth century, it also strengthens his claim about the transgressive nature of the violence unleashed by the Revolution: the older and more ingrained the norm that is being violated, the more profound the transgression.

I also agree that the Enlightenment did its share to make the transgression possible, less through its speculations about perpetual peace than through its insistence that all of Europe had to be understood as a single community, which could only be governed fairly through the application of universal, putatively rational principles. In the minds of the French Revolutionaries, such ideas may have served as a kind of license to import into the conduct of international war attitudes and practices that had once been regarded as legitimate only in the suppression of crime and rebellion. That being so, there may be something to the idea that the wars of the Revolution and Napoleon, if not quite the first total war, may be the first European Civil War—the first, at any rate, to be fought on a largely secular basis.

Still, in the final analysis I think the idea of total war has more to do with the power of the state—its capacity to mobilize resources and compel sacrifice—than with social attitudes, however dystopian. This distinction is apparent in the latter stages of Napoleon's rule, when the fires of the Revolution have long since burned to cinders, even as the war it engendered is reaching its culmination. War spreads across Europe in the Revolutionary era not simply because the Revolutionaries believed it was just and right that it should—though they did believe this—but because the Revolution itself afforded the French state unprecedented access to the human and material resources necessary to vindicate its newly inflamed ambitions. The war ends when the rest of Europe catches up; an old story, admittedly, but still the biggest piece of the puzzle as far as I can see.

David Bell notes that, in characterizing the wars of the Revolution as Europe's first total war, he does not mean to suggest that they inaugurated an *era* of total war. This seeming incongruity actually makes the transformative effect of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars more apparent. European politics is changed irreversibly by the violence the Revolution unleashed, to the extent that greater efforts would henceforth be made to insure that nothing similar happened again. The Concert of Europe was not dedicated to achieving perpetual peace. But the habits of consultation and consensus that it promoted were certainly intended to avert the renewed outbreak of general war, a task at which it enjoyed substantial success, for a time. Mark Twain, writing in 1873 about the American Civil War—another appalling bloodbath with a plausible but contested claim to totality—noted that the Civil War had deliberately been fought in a way that "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, ... and wrought so profoundly upon the

national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations.”^[2] This statement seems to me no less true of the European war that David Bell has surveyed.

In the European case, unfortunately, we know that once those two or three generations had passed, the genie of total war, made incalculably stronger thanks to the resourcefulness of European industry, would finally escape the magic bottle of instrumental rationality within which the statesmen and strategists of the nineteenth century had sought to imprison it, laying waste to the continent on a scale that even Napoleon could not have imagined. Yet even knowing this, I wonder if it is true, as Professor Bell argues, that the same “intellectual transformations” that gave the wars of the Revolution their transgressive character have “shaped the way Western societies have seen and engaged in military conflict” ever since.^[3] It does not seem to me that the entanglement of total war and modernity that began in the Revolutionary era, and reached its apotheosis in the World Wars of the twentieth century, has proven permanent.

On the contrary, in our own time, as Hew Strachan has observed,^[4] modern war and total war have ceased to be synonymous, to the point where states most capable of waging modern war—war fought by highly-trained professionals, employing the most advanced weapons, sensors, managerial techniques, and so on—are those least likely to embark upon total war, or to be required to fight it by their adversaries. They may impose it upon weaker and less capable opponents, however, by compelling them to choose between total war and capitulation; and they have often done so, inadvertently or not. This is particularly apparent in the recent history of the United States, a point that I raise only because I think it is apparent that recent events have played some part in inspiring Professor Bell’s book. The United States is the state best able to wage modern war in its most advanced form, and perhaps for that reason the most disposed to seize upon it as an instrument of policy. The bellicosity of American foreign policy in recent years does not seem to me to be connected to any disposition toward total war, but rather to the high confidence of America’s political and military leadership that total war will not be required for them to have their way. However one may judge the consequences of their conduct, I believe we must all hope that they are right about that.

References

1. Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: The Story of World War Two* (Harmondsworth, U.K: Penguin Press, 1972); the current, revised edition of this book, published in 1989 and incorporating the contributions of a third author, John Pritchard, is called *The Penguin History of the Second World War*.
2. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age* (1873; New American Library, 1969), 137-38; quoted in James McPherson, “Was It More Restrained Than You Think?” *The New York Review of Books* 55, No. 2 (14 February 2008).
3. Bell, *First Total War*, 9.
4. Hew Strachan, “Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War,” *International History Review* 22, No. 2 (June 2000): 341-70.